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Letters

Secrets That Serve As a Status Symbol

To the Editor:

That 100,000 people have access to "Sensitive Compartmented Information" (Anthony Lewis's May 5 column) is stunning news. No security system can protect information so widely disseminated.

Such information takes on its "sensitive" character only because it provides a direct link to the technical or human intelligence sources that produce it. Breaking that link is a simple matter of paraphrasing or synthesis. That should be done as a routine part of the process of analysis. In virtually all cases the information can then be declassified or distributed at a much lower level of classification.

The only people who have a need for direct access to the information prior to analysis are the people who work directly with the sources, the analysts and a few hundred officials at the very summit of the Government.

Given the most liberal allowances, there cannot possibly be more than 25,000 people for whom access to S.C.I. can be justified. The other 75,000, and possibly several thousand more, have acquired such access because they or their agencies want to be thought of as "in the know."

That means at least 75,000 expensive and unnecessary detailed background investigations; hundreds of expensively secured rooms where these extraneous people can pore through unprocessed reports, and hundreds of excess "black book" officers tramping around in search of someone to whom they can whisper their secrets, so as to seem to justify their existence.

Although I had no idea the problem had gotten so wildly out of control, the fact that some such "status symbol" problem existed with S.C.I. was brought to the attention of William P. Clark, the National Security Adviser, over a year ago.

At first Mr. Clark said that he agreed with me "in principle" and would conduct an "evaluation." Months later, when I asked for the results of the "evaluation," I was told to take my "complaint" to the Defense Department, as the National Security Council had nothing to do with the matter.

Yet in the meantime Mr. Clark signed off on the outrageous Presidential security directive that Mr. Lewis describes, thereby making the status seekers virtually impregnable while continuing to assure that the information supposedly being protected would be common gossip in every officers' wives' club in the world.

So much for Reagan Administration claims to be dealing forcefully with waste and mismanagement.

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Mechanicsburg, Pa., May 5, 1983

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